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School board might fight freeway plan

By Jason Ludwig
Staff Writer

As opposition to the proposed Loop 202 South Mountain Freeway extension along Pecos Road grows, concerns over the freeway's effects on schools in the Kyrene District grow with it.

Last week at Kyrene's governing board meeting, board member Rae Waters introduced a motion calling for an alternate route to be found for the freeway "to meet the needs of the citizens without harmful effects on the students of the Kyrene School District."

"We have so many schools that will be affected by the freeway," Waters said. "I think it's a great concern for our community."

The motion cited four elementary schools and one middle school that would be affected in Kyrene, and warned that "exhaust fumes from the traffic on the proposed freeway would have detrimental effects on the health of Kyrene students."

All Kyrene board members agreed with Waters' motion to find a new route for the highway. However, action on the proposal was postponed at the suggestion of board president Rich Zawtocky

who recommended waiting until legal advice could be heard on the matter.

According to aerial map projections of the freeway's route, Lagos Elementary will be approximately 20 feet from the wall of the freeway. Akimel A-al Middle School will be about 200 feet away, Estrella Elementary will be about 350 feet away, Sierra Elementary will be about 800 feet away and Milenio will be about 1,600 feet away.

Also affected will be Desert Vista High School, governed by the Tempe Union High School District,

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School District, and Kyrene Montessori, a charter school. Each will be about 800 feet from the walls of the highway.

Jim Strogen, principal at Lagos Elementary and a member of the South Mountain Citizens Advisory Team, said the freeway is of particular concern for his school because of its proximity.

"It will border the pri-

mary playground and portable buildings," Strogen said.

"It will be right next door."

That the walls of the freeway will push up against the playground at Lagos makes Strogen apprehensive about the consequences of nearby noise, hazardous materials transported on the freeway and the effect of air pollution on the health of his students.

"It used to be that people thought of air pollution in regional terms,

but studies have shown that it has a high impact on the health of individuals."

One of those studies, a longitudinal study published last year in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, examined the effects of air pollution on the development of lungs in 5,500 children in southern California from age 10 to 18.

Its findings reported that children exposed to concentrated air pollution had significantly lower lung function at age 18, when the lungs were almost done developing, leading researchers to conclude that "air pollution harms children's lungs for life."

Melanie Pai, spokeswoman for citizens' group Protecting Arizona's Resources and Children said that stud-

ies like that give more than enough reason to find a better route for the highway.

"Children's lungs are developing and they spend more time outside at play, so they're susceptible to this kind of air pollution," Pai said.

"If you walk by Lagos or watch the kids run track at Desert Vista it's really unfortunate to think they'll be out there exercising in that."

Arizona Department of Transportation spokesman Matt Burdick said the department is currently conducting an environmental impact study to test the effects of air pollution, but notes that its findings must be balanced against the necessity of having a freeway extension.

"One thing about [exhaust from vehicles] is that it has a rapid dispersion rate," Burdick said. "It's lighter than air so the molecules disappear upwards very rapidly."

Pai's greatest frustration is ADOT's inability

to find an alternate route for the freeway expansion that avoids proximity to so many schools, such as through the Gila River Indian Community.

"What I'm really disappointed in is the lack of creativity on the part of these so-called planners," Pai said. "They're coming back to the public, saying they don't know where else to put the highway."

"It's a cop-out. It's irresponsible, and it's not planning," she said.

The freeway plans have been on the books since 1988, said Burdick. They were laid out as part of a regional freeway plan to help traffic flow easily through the entire Valley. That means something has to be done, but every option has its negatives.

"We're in a very difficult situation," Burdick said. "With the growth in the Valley there's a need for the new freeway system."

Burdick said options are limited for ADOT.

The department looked at moving the freeway north, but that would be more harmful than leaving it on Pecos Road. They also looked at moving it south, but Pecos is the border between Phoenix and the Gila River Indian Community, which has not thus far been receptive to the idea of a freeway.

Also on the table, Burdick said, is just not building the freeway extension. He added that the no-build option is being studied for its impact on surface street congestion and I-10 traffic.

Waters, Strogen and Pai do not advocate halting construction of the freeway. They agree it's necessary to deal with the population boom in the Valley, but say that not enough has been done to explore an alternative.

"Practically, it has to be connected to the eastern 202 so it can't be too far south," said Stroger, "but any and all movement to the south helps Lagos and it helps other schools in Kyrene."

Burdick said ADOT is waiting on results from the studies being conducted, as well as federal guidance from a similar matter in Las Vegas, before continuing with freeway plans. The department is also continuing talks with the Gila River Indian Community and its newly elected governor, William R. Rhodes.

Pai remains dedicated to prodding ADOT into finding an alternate plan, saying that common sense should spur them on.

"It's basic planning," she said. "You don't put the strip club next to the church, and you don't put the freeway next to the schools."

Staff writer Jason Ludwig can be reached at (480) 898-7916 or by e-mail at jludwig@aztrib.com.